

Supremacy in the Middle East?

In German-speaking media news about the Middle East love the word "supremacy". Apparently politicians, experts and journalists can no longer talk or write about conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, the Arabian Peninsula, Palestine, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, without mentioning that Iran and Saudi Arabia are fighting for supremacy in the Middle East.

Are they really doing that? Is anything being explained with this sentence? Or is this mantra used to obscure that in Germany hardly anyone wants to publicly analyze the role of Israel in this region?

What is a supremacy? In the countries of German language the last struggle for supremacy was fought between the dynasties Habsburg and Hohenzollern. But there both noble families at the end wanted to rule alone over the whole region. In today's Middle East none of the counterparties is accused they wanted to eat the cake alone. So the search for a historical parallel in our German past is more likely to be misleading.

The quest for supremacy in today's Middle East confrontation could be much more intelligible if it meant only the global dispute between the US and Russia. In fact, the US had begun supporting the Syrian opposition after the initially peaceful demonstrations against President Assad with the intention of reducing Russian influence in the region. Full-bodied Washington asked how could a country in the Middle East region want to act as a global player that did not even produce as much social product at home as did the state of California? Today we know that the United States has lost this battle for supremacy, at least with regard to Syria.

At the purely regional level it remains open what could be won or lost with a victory or a defeat in the alleged battle for supremacy. Which content criteria could be used to measure whether the influence on neighboring countries is increasing or decreasing? In terms of financial resources, Saudi Arabia would be in the lead; in the so-called human resources Iran - this probably also in the military clout.

But at none of these levels has there been a direct confrontation. Nor is it recognizable how a change in these social and political power relations should lead to the dominance of one state over the other. And religiously, the Sunna would not replace the Shia or vice versa, even if one of the two countries could completely conquer the other militarily.

Even a historical review in the region itself does not help. There are two clues:

Before the founding of the state of Saudi Arabia, the Sa'ud Bedouin tribe, clearly driven by the hunger for pre-eminence, led successful wars of conquest against almost all the other tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. But this was not a crisis between states.,

The other was the Iraqi attempt under Saddam Hussein to increase his power and financial resources through wars against Iran and against Kuwait. These failed ventures, however, were primarily attempts at military conquest and only secondarily at regional supremacy. Therefore, the two cases to be remembered in the region do not allow for relevant and instructive conclusions.

In spite of all this, it is obvious that tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have not only increased, but they do manifest themselves in proxy wars, whose inhumanity so far could not have been mitigated or even stopped by any mediation approaches. The struggles in Yemen, Iraq and Syria, with or against Al Qaeda or Isis, the perspective of a new civil war in Lebanon, show that decision-makers in Riyadh and Tehran find these tensions extremely threatening.

What fuels this perception? The words "pursuit of supremacy" apparently cannot answer this question. It is probably another historical background which can provide adequate terminology to comprehend this strong sense of being threatened..

In 1953 Iran had witnessed the overthrow of the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadegh by a military action of US and British intelligence agencies. In April 1980, the US attempted to liberate the hostages in Tehran's American embassy with a failed commando operation. Since then, Iran has been on the "axis of evil" . "Washington pursues regime change". This is the traumatic assessment, which has been prevailing in Iran since decades. Shah Pahlevi was seen as kind of US proconsul. These are the reasons why the ayatollahs' revolution had gained popular support. Entrusting power to the clergy rather than to a hereditary monarchy was seen as an act of sovereign self-determination.

On the other side, Saudi Arabia' history of becoming a sovereign state has been completely different. Only the regulation of religious life was entirely left to the clergy of the Wahabites. The secular power, however, lied exclusively in the hands of the Sa'uds, first of the founder of the state, Abd AlAziz, later of his descendants.

This has not always been uncontroversial. Before Abd AlAziz could crown himself (after the expulsion of the Hashemites from Mecca in 1932) he had to overcome the most difficult obstacle: In 1926 he was confronted with the

uprising of several tribes, who had taken on the demand of the Muslim Brotherhood, that secular powers should be exercised by spiritual leaders.

The antagonism between these principally different forms of government in Iran and in Saudi Arabia can best be illustrated in the following way:

If today's Iranian ruling system were introduced on the Arabian peninsula, this would be the end of the royal house there.

On the other hand, if the Saudi system were to be established in Iran, then the Shah reigned there again.

Or even more succinctly: even if neither side carried out any policy against the other either in words or in deeds, they would each be perceived as a threat, as the counter model and thus as the potential announcement of mutual disempowerment.

Saudi Arabia, after Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait, went under the protective umbrella of the USA - after Kuwait, almost in no time, the Saudi oil fields would have been conquered. But in Teheran, this close relationship with the US appears as an announcement of the next attempt to bring about regime change in the Islamic Republic.

Iran has repeatedly complained that the Shiite minorities in Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia are being hindered in their freedom of worship. Each time when such accusations were heard from Teheran - alarm bells were ringing in Riyadh. Because in the east of the country lies the largest part of their oil reserves. Terrorist attacks, an uprising leading to civil war, even a secessionist attempt to create a Shiite state around Dhahran - all this would plunge the kingdom into a crisis of existence.

Aggressive attitudes often originate in the perceived necessity to defend yourself.

Perhaps it is only on the basis of this analysis that thoughts can be developed how the beginning of a détente might look like.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have historical reasons for taking threat signals seriously. Both are closely embedded in relationships with each other's great power, which in turn are antagonistic to each other.

However, this does not exclude that in both countries a new assessment will mature in the foreseeable future: Confrontation does not only bring advantages. Political costs should also be taken into account. In many parts

of the world, "Islam" is no longer perceived as peaceful. If, however, the two largest states in the Islamic Middle East jointly made visible their willingness to coexist, then it would be very difficult to blame their religion for increasing instability in the region.

Perhaps such a willingness could be expressed in words that speak concretely of what had inspired previous confrontations. In times when wars were still regarded as a continuation of politics by other means, one might have spoken - as a reassuring counter-recipe - of the possibility of a non-aggression pact. Like the Briand Kellogg Pact of 1928. Nowadays, in addition to military threat, there are subtler ways to foment an opponent's fears not to survive. The endangering cue is "regime change".

So, let us imagine, for a moment, a Saudi king and a Grand Ayatollah as Iranian leader would agree that their policy towards the neighboring country can be summed up in the words: "No regime change".

That could work wonders. Both countries have received a lot of criticism in the past. Rightly or wrongly - together, they must aim to cultivate the reputation of their countries and their religions. Specifically, this would mean for the economy that foreign investment and technological know-how would be attracted more easily if less political risks had to be priced in. The mutual gain would be all the more likely, the sooner after such a signal conversations would be started to determine how the promise should be kept. The names of the two heads of state could stand for a historic event - for the beginning of a period of regional pacification and cooperation. They would become symbols of real sovereignty of their countries, even against the whisperings and resistances of greater powers. This policy they would have initiated themselves.